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C O N F I D E N T I A L GENEVA 000153

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DEPT FOR IO/RHS, DRL/MLGA, L/HRR

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TAGS: PHUM UNHRC

SUBJECT: LOOKING TOWARD SELECTING THE NEXT UN HIGH
COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: GENEVA 89

CLASSIFIED BY DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE MARK STORELLA,
REASONS 1.4(B), (C)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, tendered her resignation to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon several months ago, according to a well-informed Mission contact at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). SYG Ban asked Arbour to extend her stay at least until the end of 2008, but Arbour declined. She will leave OHCHR in late June when her contract ends and most likely return to her native Canada, announcing her departure during the March Human Rights Council session. The African Group in Geneva believes it is Africa's turn to fill the position, but there is no formal rule that would prevent the SYG from considering serious candidates from any regional group. Neither the African nor Eastern European group has yet held the position atop the OHCHR. The next High Commissioner should be someone who could successfully lead OHCHR while retaining the gravitas and willingness to stand up under relentless political pressure. END SUMMARY.

ARBOUR RESIGNS

¶2. (C) We met February 26 with Charles Radcliffe, Chief of External Affairs and Donor Relations at OHCHR (please protect), to discuss Louise Arbour's impending departure as High Commissioner for Human Rights. Radcliffe said that after four years as High Commissioner, Arbour had decided that she had had enough. SYG Ban had tried hard to persuade Arbour to stay on, at least until the end of 2008, but ideally longer. In principle, Arbour would have been willing to stay another two years, according to Radcliffe, but the final straw in her decision was the fact that she was appointed the Secretary-General of the Durban Review Conference by the terms of the resolution creating the new process. Arbour did not want anything to do with the Durban exercise, did not want her reputation sullied by association with it, and had made no effort to create a mini-secretariat exclusively to handle the Durban Review Conference within the Office of the High Commissioner, as the African Group and OIC expected. Radcliffe said that Arbour was "tough" but added that she was 62 years old, had not been able to see her family in Canada very often since moving to Geneva, and had been subject to relentless criticism from all sides that made her job difficult. (Reftel describes recent attack on her, and on the independence of the OHCHR, over the issue of her Strategic Management Plan.) The combination of these pressures had finally convinced Arbour to tender her resignation.

MANEUVERING TO FIND A REPLACEMENT

¶3. (C) The High Commissioner for Human Rights is named by the Secretary General, theoretically on the basis of regional rotation. The African Group considers it its turn to nominate the candidate for the SYG's consideration. OHCHR's Radcliffe said he hoped influential donors to OHCHR would consider seriously supporting a strong, independent-minded candidate, preferably a woman, who could stand up to human rights violators and others unlikely to be receptive to criticism from the Office of the High Commissioner.

Radcliffe observed that the U.S. and the so-called "Rubens Group" (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, Netherlands, UK) between them make up some two-thirds of all funding to OHCHR, and that we might usefully try to encourage strong potential candidates to come forward. Separately, a Geneva-based Nordic delegation told us that the Nordic delegations in New York plan to demarche SYG Ban later this week to argue that he select a person of high integrity who will be able to stand up under the inherent pressures of the job. Radcliffe argued that some potential African candidates along these lines included Nigerian human rights lawyer Aye Obe, former South African ANC vice president (and High Commissioner in London) Cheryl Carolus, and South African human rights icon (and wife of Nelson Mandela) Graca Michel, although she might not be interested.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) It will be important for the next High Commissioner not to be too closely affiliated with any one country or regional group. Any encouragement we might provide to potential candidates should be done discreetly, under the

circumstances.

TICHENOR